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LONDON FOR ARAB MEDIA OFFICE

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TAGS: [PREL](#) [KPAO](#) [QA](#) [ALJAZEERA](#)

SUBJECT: AL JAZEERA ACCORDING TO WADAH KHANFAR

REF: A. DOHA 312

[B](#). DOHA 467

[1](#)1. Summary: (U) On May 21, a Broadcasting Board of Governors (BBG) delegation met with Wadah Khanfar, Director-General of the Al Jazeera Network (AJN) and Managing Director of the Arabic Al Jazeera TV channel. Khanfar told the delegation that Al Jazeera, reflecting regional developments, has entered the third of three major phases it has passed through since its inception in 1996. He talked at length about the new Al Jazeera English channel and also confirmed his intention to step down as MD of the Arabic channel to focus on his responsibilities as DG of the overall network, but he did not discuss a timeline or the identity of his replacement. End summary.

[1](#)2. (U) On May 21, a BBG delegation led by Governor Joaquim Blaya met in Doha with Wadah Khanfar, currently serving as both Director-General of the overall Al Jazeera Network (AJN - reftels) and Managing Director of the Arabic language Al Jazeera TV channel. The delegation included Brian Coniff, BBG Executive Director; Bert Kleinman, President of the Middle East Broadcasting Networks (MBN -- in charge of Al Hurra TV and Radio Sawa); and Mouafac Harb, Executive Vice President of MBN.

[1](#)3. (U) Responding to questions, Khanfar described Al Jazeera's beginnings, noting that Al Jazeera's "edge" then and now is that the channel is seen as an integral part of the socio-cultural fabric of the Middle East region and an entity that "understands the cognitive map of the people in this region." Khanfar noted that Al Jazeera's 10th anniversary is coming up on November 1, 2006 and told the delegation that, in his view, Al Jazeera has entered the third of the three phases it has passed through since its inception in 1996.

The first phase: 1996 - 2001

[1](#)4. (U) The leitmotif of the first period was Al Jazeera's motto: "The opinion and the other opinion," said Khanfar. Al Jazeera stood out as a voice challenging the status quo and in particular the policies of Arab governments. Its focus was on the region, and its themes were regionally-focused, with emphasis on reform, democracy and corruption.

The second phase: 2001-2005

[1](#)5. (U) In the second phase, the focus moved to the international arena, to global issues such as the War on Terror, with coverage of Iraq, Afghanistan and Palestine as "hotspots" in that context, said Khanfar. The focus shifted to global political issues, with the Arab world as one unit and America, Europe and the West as another, he said. In this phase, Al Jazeera developed "war reporting" as an organizational skill for the first time as it reported on the "hotspots." In this phase, Arab domestic politics took a back seat both in the regional perspective and in Al Jazeera's perspective, he said.

The third phase: 2005 - present

[1](#)6. (U) This third phase began with Egypt's Kifayah movement, and was consolidated by elections and pro-reform movements in Lebanon, Kuwait, Bahrain, Iraq and Palestine, said Khanfar. The mood started to change and Al Jazeera began to return to the issues that had concerned it in its first phase -- democracy, reform and Arab issues. "Now, if you look at our headlines, you see most of the issues that are discussed are regional issues," including political Islam, good governance, democracy, Middle East economic and women's issues, internal struggles among Palestinian factions, and so forth. This third phase includes the establishment of Al Jazeera English and the effect of that establishment, he added.

17. (U) Khanfar pointedly called the English-language channel scheduled for launch latter this year "Al Jazeera English." (Comment: There has been controversy over usage of the nomenclature "Al Jazeera International" for the English channel, with opponents of that usage arguing that such a label implies that the English channel is international while the Arabic channel is not. This is another manifestation of the ongoing tension between the Arabic and English AJ concepts, with those in the Arabic "camp" claiming this development over nomenclature as a victory. End comment.) When asked about this, Khanfar said that the matter is being discussed by the AJN board, and that his proposal is to change the name of the new channel to "Al Jazeera English" and to use the label "International" to describe the whole non-Arabic AJ operation, and not just as the logo of an individual channel. This would simplify matters should AJN decide to branch out into another language channel -- Al Jazeera French, or Al Jazeera Turkish, for example. The actual logo for the English channel would be the classic Al Jazeera logo with "English" written underneath it in English. Any new language channels would similarly have their mother-language appearing in native script under the classic AJ logo, he said.

#### The new channel

18. (U) As he did in Ref B, Khanfar tried to emphasize that the English channel will be an editorially separate entity from the Arabic channel. Each channel will have its own editorial board, he said. He added that there will be an overall AJN Editorial Board, consisting of the two boards combined, which will meet periodically "for coordination" purposes (Note: This appears to be a closer merging of editorial functions than was apparent during Ref B conversations. End note.) The English channel will not necessarily use the same terminology as the Arabic channel, since "Every language has a mind of its own," he said. AJ Arabic already has a code of conduct, derived from its code of ethics, and the English channel is developing its code, along with its own style guide, he said. "The BBC style guide will not be very far from the Al Jazeera English style guide. We are not inventing a new way of reporting here," he said. The new thing Al Jazeera is bringing to the table is its focus on field reporting, said Khanfar. 70 percent of news bulletins are field reporting, he said, and "we give and will give field reporting a high priority."

19. (U) Asked about the launch date of the new channel (Note: Initially announced for spring 2006, it has since slipped to early summer and then to the fall. End note), Khanfar laughed and said: "Very soon." He said the delay relates to the installation of technical equipment. The decision was taken early on that the new channel would use high-definition TV technology, which necessitated connecting its four regional hubs (Doha, Kuala Lumpur, Washington, London) using broadband fiber-optics. The decision stands, but has led to technical delays because of technology's complexity, he said. (Note: In addition, the AJ English studios in Doha, which are being constructed next to the AJ Arabic studios, are clearly still not ready for use and occupancy. End note.)

110. (U) Asked about AJ English distribution problems in the U.S., Khanfar acknowledged that AJ has a significant perception problem in the US, where it is often perceived as "the beheading channel" or "the mouthpiece of terrorists." But the network has signed one contract in the US and is working toward more, he said. AJ English will also be available free via an internet connection to US and world users, he said, so that anyone with a broadband connection can watch it, and even those with a slower connection will be able to watch, although with reduced quality.

#### Personnel and bureaus

111. (U) AJ Arabic currently has 40 bureaus and 75 correspondents worldwide, said Khanfar. He said AJ English will be working out of these same bureaus, and that probably 7 or 8 additional bureaus will be added, including in places such as India and the Philippines, where AJ does not currently have bureaus. He estimated that the total overall number of employees of both the English and Arabic channels combined does not exceed 2,000. Less than a quarter of these positions are editorial, he said, estimating that each channel has approximately 160 journalists, producers and editors, with the remainder providing technical and administrative support. Who will lead AJ Arabic after Khanfar?

112. (U) Asked about his plan "to replace himself" as head of the Arabic channel (Ref B), Khanfar acknowledged that holding

down the two jobs he is currently performing for an extended period of time is demanding and unrealistic, not least because of the sharply different perspective required for each. He said he has raised the issue with the AJN board (Ref A), which will "make a decision," but did not provide details on timeline or the identity of his replacement. (Comment: rumor and speculation are rife in Doha about the identity of his replacement, as well as about the nature and extent of his power as Director-General of the Al Jazeera Network, and his reportedly contentious relationship with some of the AJN board members. End comment.)

AJ Arabic translated  
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13. (U) Khanfar referred to several existing agreements whereby the content of the Arabic channel is broadcast abroad in foreign languages using simultaneous interpretation. He said about 6 hours a day of translated AJ coverage is broadcast in Malaysia in the Malay language, with one to two hours daily also broadcast in Indonesia and in Urdu and Hindi in India. He said the channel is looking at entering into an agreement in Turkey for the same purpose. The system does have problems, he acknowledged. He had just returned from a trip to Kuala Lumpur, where he said there were problems with the fact that the translators don't have the contextual knowledge they need, resulting in inaccuracies in translation.

Privatizing Al Jazeera  
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14. (U) Asked about his Ref B comments, in which he noted that part of his task as DG of AJN is to select a business model for the eventual listing of AJN on the stock market, Khanfar indicated that a note of caution has been injected into that plan. He said he wanted over the next five years to introduce more of a business model into Al Jazeera's operations, partly in order to make the network at least partially self-dependent with revenues from advertising. But he said that a total listing on the stock exchange is unlikely. Those with money to invest in the region usually have political connections, he said, and AJN would not want to create a situation where investors inimical to the AJN ethos were able to gain a controlling interest in the network. What is being considered now is a possible partial listing on the stock exchange to avoid such an eventuality, said Khanfar.

Comment  
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15. (SBU) The Al Jazeera Network is clearly a much bigger animal than the already unwieldy Al Jazeera Arabic channel and has yet to define many key aspects of itself, including the relationship between the Arabic and English channels, the technical details of the framework AJN will provide for the overall operation of the different AJ entities, and the distribution of power within that framework. Chatter about tension between Khanfar and Nigel Parsons, the Managing Director of Al Jazeera English, continues, with some speculating that Parsons will leave the English channel soon after its launch, and others claiming that Khanfar is trying to infiltrate the English channel with employees loyal to him, since he currently has no loyalty base from which to attempt to control the new channel. The identity of Khanfar's replacement at AJ Arabic is also the source of much speculation, given that Al Jazeera politics, like Qatari politics, are personality driven and the inclinations of his replacement are likely to have a significant impact on the channel's operations.  
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